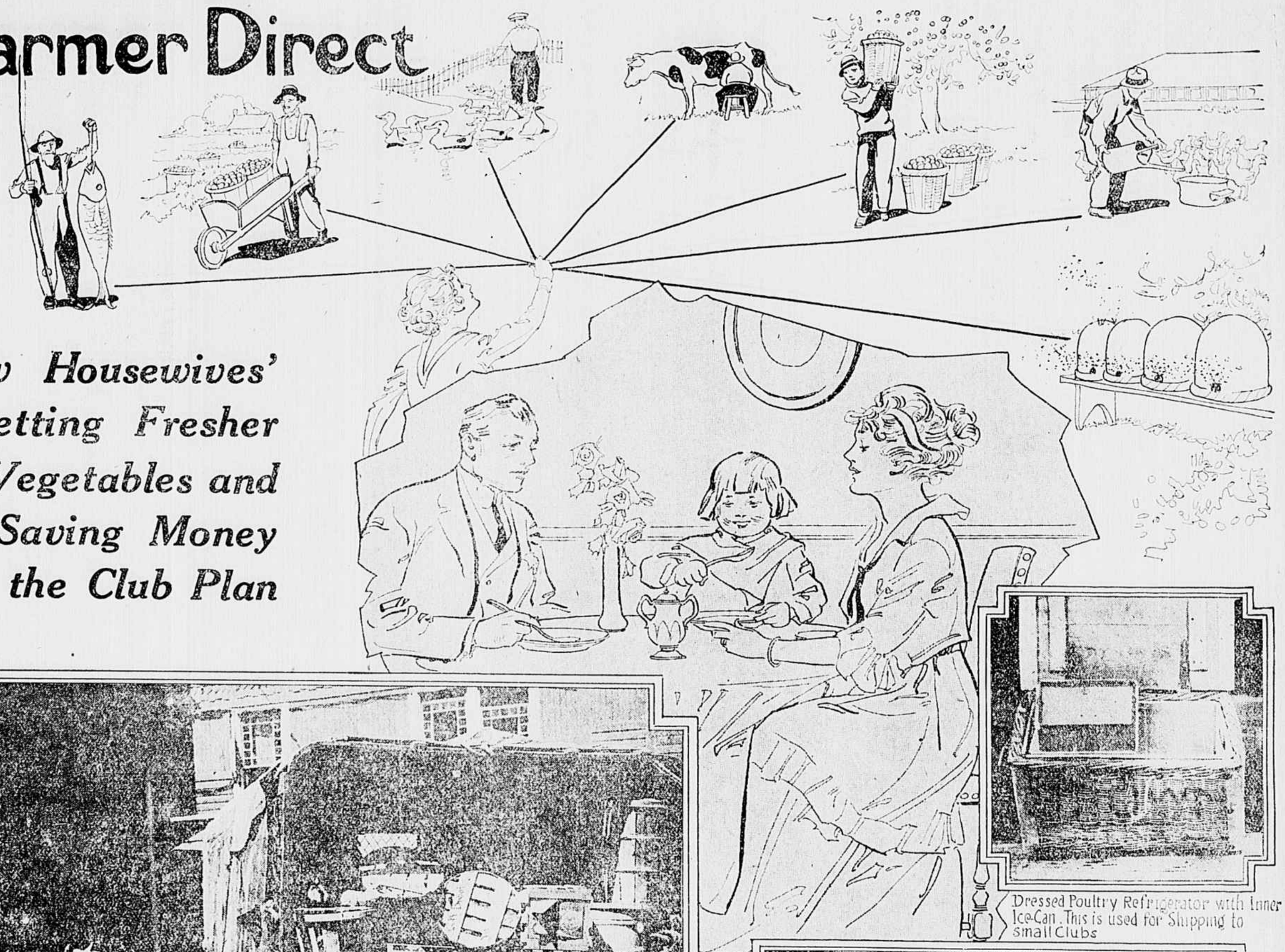
From the Farmer Direct to Your Dinner Table



How the New Housewives' Clubs Are Getting Fresher Butter, Eggs, Vegetables and Poultry, and Saving Money by Buying on the Club Plan

THERE is one thing upon which the economic doctors, the high-cost-of-living-reduction specialists, agree unanimously. And that is this: you must simplify the present system of food products' distribution before you reduce the cost for Mr. and Mrs. City Consumer.

Not twenty-five miles from New York's Broadway there are several hundred persons—housewives and husbands, too—who began to simplify the system as it concerned them several months ago—and today they reckon their economies into the twenties and thirties of per centages. They formed a co-operative club that was really out to accomplish something and proceeded without further investigation into the theories of economics to purchase butter, eggs, fruits and fresh vegetables direct from producers and growers.

To be sure it did not gladden the hearts of the local retailers to see 1,000 dozen eggs, 1,400 pounds of butter, an average of 600 pounds of fresh poultry and many other things come into that suburban town each month through a newly dredged direct-from-producer channel, but that did not bother the suburbanites. They were saving visible money and, what is quite as much to the point, they were getting produce fresh from the fields as fast as the trains could carry it.

The workings of this community club are typical of hundreds of others which have sprung up in the East in the last year. At the incoming of the parcel post the larger express companies of the land began a sort of industrial work in the producer-to-consumer movement which has led to the development of many consumers' purchasing clubs in the densely populated sections of the Atlantic Seaboard where food products are generally more expensive. Taking advantage of specific information laid before it by the express companies—quotations from reputable producers on eggs, butter, apples, meats and scores of other products—the suburban community club went ahead and arranged with those producers to ship direct to their headquarters upon receipt of check.

The club chose from the weekly quotation bulletins issued by the transportation companies whatever quantities of whatever foodstuffs its members wanted, left that order with the local express agent—and receipted for the produce when it came. From headquarters the secretary of the club arranged for ultimate distribution by messengers to such members as cared to pay a small delivery fee; many, however, came and took home their purchases themselves.

The club's holiday turkey order last Christmas amounted to 900 pounds, shipped direct from Indiana turkey ranches. Fresh celery in fifty dozen lots was "imported" and divided up in small lots. California fruits, maple sugar and syrup from Pennsylvania and Ohio shipping points, eggs from the Middle Western States and butter from Illinois creameries—all were satisfactorily purchased and laid down at the club's headquarters at prices averaging 20 per cent less than retail prices.

In New York department stores, insurance offices, banks, labor organizations and factories can be counted several hundred buying clubs. Often they have but twenty or thirty members. Through educating the farmers and producers to pack in small lots—smaller than they are accustomed to ship in wholesale dealings—the transportation companies have made it possible for girls' clubs, and even neighborhood circles, to simplify their buying system. It is a poor town from New York to Chicago that has not its buying clubs now organized. A recent estimate gave Paterson, N. J., forty-five clubs; Buffalo, thirty; Toledo, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Louisville and Fort Wayne 100 odd between them, with probably 100 alone in Chicago (many among her manufacturing establishments with 200 and 300 members apiece); and Philadelphia nearly as many.

One of the Chicago clubs has an arrangement with the heads of the firm among whose employes it was formed whereby the firm pays the bills of the buying organization and debits its employes on pay day for the foodstuffs ordered. It is a bit of welfare work that has proved remarkably successful, and has been imitated in the Eastern buying club circles.

To trace a typical small order and shipment will explain where the simplification of the distribution system comes in. Take the instance of a neighborhood club in New Jersey, composed of not more than ten people. It really started with but two housewives who had heard of the plan and ordered a ten-pound butter package from one of the many Ohio creameries who have taken up the direct-to-consumer business in dead earnest. The price of butter, best creamery variety, in the retail grocers' shops of the town was forty-one cents per pound. It was not an exorbitant price for good butter considering the season of the year and considering that not less than three middlemen and probably more had handled the product—but the New Jersey housewives were out gunning for cheaper living and better quality and they decided to take a chance on the new plan.

Covering the expense by personal check, they left the order with their local express agent. He in turn forwarded the money to the express agent in the town where the designated butter producer was located. The agent there turned over the money and order to the creamery's sales department. The desired quantity, ten pounds, was packed and shipped. It caught the refrigerator express out of the Ohio town that night and was delivered to the New Jersey woman the next afternoon. She did a little figuring.

The ten one-pound parafine-cardboard cartons of butter before her had cost exactly thirty-three cents each; she was saving money. The cost at the creamery was thirty cents per pound. The transportation charge—which had also been figured out for her on the weekly quotation bulletin—had been thirty cents, or three cents per pound. Her neighbors studied the plan for a few days and then fell to organizing and within a month were bringing not only butter in thirty pound lots, but poultry, eggs, vegetables from faraway Southern producing points—all at lower costs. They skipped the middlemen on certain things and saved money.

It is not an involved system. It is merely a linking up of producer and consumer—seller and purchaser. And the great popularity of it is due to the strong desire of farmers to trade in many of their most perishable and delicate products direct with consumers. They are admittedly after a larger share of the city man's purchasing dollar and they are adjusting their sales methods and even production methods to accomplish this direct-selling.

This is plainly apparent in the work of certain California and New York State farmers. Within the last two years an almost unbelievably large traffic in small lots of California dried fruits, fresh cherries, nuts and oranges has sprung up between Eastern kitchens and Western groves and orchards. "Packed by the grower, direct to you," is a slogan that has many followers among Pacific Coast producers. From a single valley in Southern California last year over $0,000 parcels of fruits and nuts—five, ten and twenty pound lots for the most part—were sold to long distance customers in Philadelphia, New York, Boston and other Atlantic Coast cities.

There are fruit growers in New York and New Jersey who have gone into the direct marketing business with as much thoroughness as a mail order house. Apples and pears, selected with care and wrapped in attractive ways, move out in large quantities to metropolitan homes. Combination packages of potatoes, apples and other fruits have become favorite orders of city housewives. The reputation of Long Island farmers, under the guidance of Hal B. Fullerton, Medford's direct marketing enthusiast and pioneer, has grown to such a point that the producers have actually been sold out many times and forced to return orders.

Certain shrewd business farmers with an eye to the future have made a specialty of selling eggs to the buying club trade of the large cities. Naturally this involves more careful selection, more attractive packing—in short, it involves standardization at the source. But there is a larger part of the ultimate consumers' expenditure won by them by selling to co-operative clubs than by letting eggs go through the ordinary wholesale channels of sale, so they are willing to take the pains. Once a farmer gets a reputation for supplying high quality eggs the buying club trade swings towards him as naturally as custom flows to the reliable city merchant who sells good value clothes.

The number of producers who are thus taking unto themselves the functions of middlemen is growing rapidly in all parts of the country. The cheese manufacturers of Wisconsin along with the California fruit growers and Iowa egg producers, are paying sharper attention to the housewife's trade and particularly the co-operative clubs' trade than ever before.

An Ohio buying club gets regular consignments of California early vegetables in season. In two months the buying clubs of Lincoln, Nabraska, placed orders with Texan pecan growers for 800 pounds of nuts. Even frogs' legs from Minnesota and melons from Indiana have been disposed of to Eastern buying clubs of late. Peaches from fertile lake sections of Ohio and Michigan and cherries from Illinois have proved practical and economical shipments. Fish, oysters, vegetables of all kinds, honey in ten and twenty pound pails, country smoked hams and strips of bacon, ducks and hot-house fruits—in many sections of the country they have been standardized at the source, and means has been found to ship them conveniently and economically to buying clubs in distant cities.

It is, of course, quite out of reason to speak of eliminating all middlemen by such a movement. But there is no gainsaying that thousands of families who are progressive enough to do direct marketing are actually saving money by the practise. With many kinds of produce the movement is bound to increase, and rather sensational economies to the consumer are certain to be gained.

The chief good, the really lasting benefit to the public at large, however, will be found in the regulative effect of the co-operative movement. It has already had its effect in a number of the towns where consumers' clubs have stirred up competition. Dealers are not slow to take notice of any movement which appeals to their customers. Every ton of food brought into a community through a newly dredged direct-from-the-producer channel impresses the retailers with the possibilities of a more simplified system of distribution. There is a rather signal example of this in a railroad town of the near-West.

B—— was one of those smaller centres of consumption which our present system of distributing farm products sometimes completely ignores. Cantaloupe, peaches, sound red apples and fresh gathered eggs at a reasonable price were unknown in the town. The dealers bought their limited stocks through a wholesaler in a distint city, and when the wholesalers ran short of anything in particular you could not get it in ——'s at any price. Some of the railroad men of the town formed a buying club and began reaching out direct to the actual supply fields of the country. In a month the retail dealers woke up to the fact that they were behind the times of their community and they proceeded to search out producers on their own responsibility.

For a while their rivalry was merry, but finally the dealers with their larger orders and better delivery facilities won out. The buying club dwindled and later fell to pieces but—fruit, fresh vegetables and other inalienable rights of every American were on sale in wide assortments and at lowered prices in every shop in town. The consumers' club broke up cheerfully; it had accomplished its purpose.

Hal B. Fullerton, a Long Island pioneer in the "Farm to Family" movement, is of the opinion that it would be entirely practical to dispose of a whole year's output of Long Island's bountiful crop production direct to consumers' clubs and individual housewives, if some enterprising farmer only had the time to devote to the engineering of the project. As it is, the Long Island direct marketing work testifies to the plausibility of his statement. And two hundred odd consumers' clubs within the city of New York, buying probably an average of 1,000 pounds of produce from Western fields each month, give added strength to the potentialities of a more simplified system of distributing foodstuffs.

In this Magazine Section next Sunday there will be printed an article telling just how any group of people in a large city or a small one can form and operate one of these co-operative purchasing clubs. It will give full details about the methods of buying and paying for the goods, how to unpack and distribute them and what sort of carriers to provide for the different kinds of farm products. If you want to supply your table with better food at less expense, don't miss next Sunday's article.

The Weekly Market Basket of a Large Consumers' Club in Manhattan—Direct from Producer to Consumer.

Dressed Poultry Refrigerator with Inner Ice-Can. This is used for Shipping to small Clubs

Grading and Packing Apples for Shipment Direct from the Orchard to the Consumers' Homes.